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ASSESSING SUCCESS THROUGH PARTY LABEL DURABILITY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY OF ALBANIA AND THE HOMELAND UNION OF LITHUANIA

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Abstract: *This study provided a theoretical framework explaining center-right opposition parties' evolution in former Eastern Europe. It answered why post-communist center-right parties lacked consistent success and either became marginalized, altered their ideologies, or ceased to exist in the long run. By taking the Democratic Party of Albania as one of the exceptions to the rule and comparing it to the Homeland Union-Lithuanian Christian Democrats, we showed the discrepancy with much of the other center-right parties. We followed a most different systems design, where the dominant center-right party of Albania and the dominant one in Lithuania were compared. Although much different in history, political culture, and institutions, they had similar successful trajectories as dominant center-right parties. We argued that the success of these parties depends upon the durability of party labels as a critical determinant of a party's success historically, which takes priority over party strategy, mobilization power, social base, and the behavior of the center-right party toward political institutions. Overall, we emphasized party labels as cues of party identification and success.*

Keywords: *Center-Right Parties; Eastern Europe; Democratic Party; Albania; Homeland Union-Lithuanian Christian Democrats; Lithuania*

INTRODUCTION

The center-right parties in Eastern Europe were born as anti-communist fronts and generated a social mobilization never seen before and after. More than three decades in the making, these center-right political parties have marginalized, transformed themselves ideologically, or disappeared altogether. Often, they ceased to exist, replaced by new parties occupying the center-right or shifting the political scenery to the extreme right. Only a couple of exceptions have survived, remained ideologically aligned to their foundations, and have also shown electoral resilience through time. By focusing on the Democratic Party of Albania (DP) and comparing it to another similarly successful center-right party in Eastern Europe - Homeland Union-Lithuanian Christian Democrats (HUCLD), we seek to understand better why the majority of anti-communist fronts that emerged as center-right parties in the aftermath of communism failed to sustain themselves politically in the long run. In contrast, a few others, like our selected cases, proved resilient.

This study focuses on center-right political parties because they represent a paradigmatic shift and a break with the communist past. While center-left parties, in most cases, represent a

continuity of the former communist regime characterized by the one-party state model, they can thus be considered successor parties (Bozóki and Ishiyama 2002), the center-right parties were the main opposition that signaled the birth of the political pluralism. What is puzzling, though, and the initial starting point of our research, is why most of these emerging center-right opposition parties in former Eastern European space disappeared with time, became fringe parties, or changed their labels and other political symbolism.

The present paper focuses chiefly on the success or failure of center-right political parties in electoral terms. It also seeks to understand why most of these parties disappeared altogether or became irrelevant to political struggle. In a third variant, they transformed themselves ideologically, like Fidesz did in Hungary. However, we only consider the role and impact of the center-right parties while excluding the fringe and radical right parties that have been the focus of other published work (Buštíková 2018). Furthermore, we exclude historical parties re-established after the fall of communism, such as the National Liberal Party of Romania.

Therefore, the cases of DP and HULCD (Lith. TS-LKD) are taken under particular scrutiny as outliers that help us understand the ongoing and continuing support for a center-right political party in a setting like former Eastern Europe where all the other mainstream center-right political parties have either disappeared, ideologically transformed, or changed party labels from their inception in the early 1990s to today.

Therefore, we need to analyze the explanatory factors leading to such deviation in the first place. Hence, our research question is: Why did the Democratic Party of Albania and Homeland Union-Lithuanian Christian Democrats of Lithuania prove so successful, while most of the other center-right counterparts in Eastern Europe had much shorter political lives?

Our argument hinges on the idiosyncratic role of the durability of party labels in predicting long-term party success. We contend that this factor surpasses others, such as party strategy, the behavior of center-right parties toward political institutions, mobilization power through establishing a predominant social base, or preferences of international partners, all acknowledged in the existing literature. Therefore, we aim to address a significant gap in the current literature by highlighting the importance of party labels and the accompanying membership identification. We seek to ascertain whether they hold any relevance or exert any degree of influence on electoral success, particularly concerning center-right parties in the Eastern European context. To achieve this, we define and operationalize party stability and success, not solely relying on party labels as proxies but also following Borbáth (2020), considering their programmatic stability.

The paper's primary objective is to make a theoretical contribution in understating the trajectories of the first opposition parties of the center-right in what is now commonly referred to as "New Europe" (Baker 2003, 1). It seeks to understand why they generally failed, while the center-left parties had a more successful trajectory, whereas the initial expectation was for the opposite to happen. Secondly, this study seeks to understand the causes and offer a valid explanation for the durability of party labels as a prime indicator of a party's success in historical terms.

Lastly, the present study holds additional empirical significance due to the Democratic Party (DP) in Albania finding itself embroiled in an existential battle. It has consecutively lost

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three general elections for the first time in its three-decade history. This current development is far from routine; it poses a significant threat to the party, potentially weakening it, causing division, and even rendering it irrelevant in the near future. However, despite these extraordinary circumstances, the party label remains unchanged, even as opposing factions contest ownership of the party's seal in court. This paper aims to analyze the reasons behind its longevity thus far, alongside its counterpart, the Homeland Union - Lithuanian Christian Democrats (HULCD) in Lithuania. We seek to answer what factors have contributed to their resilience, focusing mainly on party label durability. This often overlooked aspect explains party resilience in the long run, especially in the context of former Eastern Europe.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communist legacy has been one of the determinants of post-communist paths in the former Eastern European space. Communist legacies are "the structural, cultural, and institutional starting points of ex-communist countries at the outset of the transition" (Pop-Eleches 2007, 910). Similarly, Anna Grzymała-Busse (2002, 15) defines legacies as "patterns of behavior, cognition, and organization" that can be traced back to the communist regime, and she also adds that they tend "to persist despite a change in the conditions that initially gave rise to them" Anna Grzymała-Busse (2002, 15). Communist legacy has mainly structured the successor parties that emerged from former communist parties that were transformed into the new socialist or social-democratic parties.

The center-right political parties in Eastern Europe emerged from "broad-based anti-communist coalition movements" (Innes 2002, 88). The general contention in the existing literature is that after the first parliamentary elections, these inchoate and diverse movements had to establish political parties (Innes 2002; Bakke 2010; Vachudova 2008). The ideological profile of these newly emerging center-right parties could be either predominantly liberal in favor of institutionalizing a market economy or predominantly conservative and, to some extent, nationalist, highlighting the cultural cleavage in the society rather than socio-economic programmatic divisions in party competition. Various factions within or emerging from the anti-communist movements initially competed to define the dominant center-right political party (Bakke and Sitter 2005). Vachudova (2008) argues that in those cases in which the anti-regime opposition "was strong enough to take power in 1989 or 1990, it went on to become the ideological, organizational, and elite base for one or more moderate right parties with ties to the West European center-right" (p. 389).

Meanwhile, the same center-right party can initially manifest a liberal ideology and then later transform itself into a conservative party or merge conservative and liberal ideas, as with the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) (Bakker and Sitter 2005). Fidesz is the epitome of this ideological transformation of the same party (Innes 2002; Enyedi 2005a). However, it should be mentioned that political parties such as Fidesz, Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland, and Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO) in the Czech Republic "radicalized while in government" (Vachudova 2020, 318). Hence, by adopting an ethnopopulist strategy and ideology, such political parties that used to be mainstream conservative ones "play[ed] outside the bounds of the liberal democratic playing field" (Vachudova 2020, 321).

With few exceptions, there is a shared agreement in the party politics literature that those center-right parties that were conservative and used "anti-communism as one of the most important markers of right-wing identity" (Enyedi 2005a, 233) were most successful (Haughton 2014; Innes 2002; Bakke 2010) than liberal parties, which in East Central Europe formed coalitions with the center-left parties. The splinter parties from the DP, which remained loyal to the liberal creed, became coalition partners of the dominant center-left party. At the same time, the DP became a traditional center-right party and utilized the anti-communist ideology. The HULCD, emerging as the heir of the Reform Movement of Lithuania (Sąjūdis), became the mainstream center-right party renouncing any left-liberal or centrist position that was characteristic of the political factions that left the movement and, by default, the HULCD.

However, a specific combination of ideologies is insufficient to explain the success of a center-right party created after the opposition movements against the communist regime. A thin definition sees them as "center-right formations that have been accepted into the main organization of the European center-right" (Hanley 2004 quoted in Bakke 2010, 11). Yet, a more substantive definition of a center-right party is needed to assess one of the critical factors of party durability and dominance: the party strategy (Bakke and Sitter 2005). According to this definition, a center-right party: "identifies with core West European center-right traditions and fuses liberal-capitalist modernization with traditional moral values and specific local and national identities" (Hanley 2004 quoted in Vachudova 2008, 393).

When distinguishing between successful and marginalized center-right parties, Innes argues that parties that followed more "programmatic, ideological, or constituency-based strategies over catch-all strategies" (2002, 91) have done poorly electorally and in the long run. Yet, this argument is mainly based on the assumption that the political parties of the opposition were, first and foremost, broad-based movements and that these movements founded political parties after achieving political representation in the parliament. Henceforth, these center-right political parties became catch-all parties if they sought to become dominant. Nonetheless, this argument is contradicted by the empirical evidence presented in this article, which focuses mainly on Albania, in which the main center-right opposition party was already established before the constitution of a broader anti-communist political movement.

On the other hand, following an ideological or constituency-based strategy does not necessarily imply a coherent programmatic and substantive policy-oriented strategy of political competition. While DP followed an anti-communist ideology and created partisan linkages with those social groups that experienced communist persecution, it has also not been entirely coherent in terms of economic or social policies that benefitted them. A second assumption of this conventional and legacy type of argument is that it contrasts historical center-right parties of the inter-war period with the dominant center-right parties of post-communism (Innes 2002; Sitter 2008)—the historical parties are described as having a clear constituency and a more defined ideological profile. However, evidence shows that historical parties of the center-right, with a few exceptions, fared poorly electorally in the post-communist period (Kitschelt et al. 1999). Henceforth, the dominant center-right parties that succeeded or anticipated anti-regime opposition movements incorporated policy positions and ideologies usually associated with the right-wing historical parties. By doing so, the newly created center-right parties outplaced these historical parties, which became fringe or marginal in the post-communist period.

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Here, we argue that such parties' success mainly depends upon the durability of party labels as a critical determinant of a party's success in the post-communist period, which takes priority over other factors often widely discussed in the literature. Such factors are political systems, mobilization power and social base, international recognition, and the behavior of the center-right party towards political institutions that have already taken considerable attention in the existing scholarship. For example, political parties in post-communist countries are considered to lack a social base, and partisan loyalties are not entrenched. The party systems in CEE have been characterized by electoral volatility (Bakke 2010) and, more recently, by breakthrough anti-establishment parties (Hanley and Sikk 2016) and instability (Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2015). The anti-establishment parties formed in Albania have not passed the electoral threshold and did not pose a challenge to the dominant center-right party and the two-block party competition.

Notwithstanding the electoral volatility and the upending of the party system institutionalization across East-Central European countries, scholars have argued that "on the contrary, there was evidence of social basis to party support across the region already in the early 1990s" (Bakke 2010, 1). The interaction between the social base of a political party and the political party seems to be at the center of this argument. If the center-right political parties were: "Parties with large membership (…) and early opposition parties" (Bakke 2010, 4), then they could claim a solid social base support. Yet, the interaction between the social base of a party and the political party is an indicator of party institutionalization (Casal-Bértoa 2012), which, among others, is triggered by "the close identification of the parties with their faithful followers (both members and voters), prompt[ing] a certain continuity in their ideological positions (Mainwaring and Zoco 2007 quoted in Casal-Bértoa 2012, 457).

Building upon arguments made by (Bakke and Sitter 2005), one of the factors that influence the durability of the center-right party is the party strategy, defined as: "the link between goals and their achievement, a formula for how a party is going to compete" (Bakke and Sitter 2005, 244). Henceforth, the center-right political party may strategically decide to emphasize a particular ideology and appeal predominantly to a specific constituency without necessarily endorsing a programmatic party competition. Thus, the dominant center-right party could have initially pursued a particular strategy of party, which appeared to be less effective, and switched to a more convenient and successful party strategy. The empirical evidence regarding center-right parties' strategies in post-communist East Central Europe shows that the political strategy could stem from "Western European ideologies" (Sitter 2008, 434-435) to "inter-war or immediate post-war ideology, the struggle against communism, or even to focus on the problems of post-communist state-building" (Sitter 2008, 434-435). Another causal factor contributing to the stability of the center-right political party that dominates the center-right political spectrum is its mobilization power (Enyedi 2005a). Still, it did not play a central role in the DP case. Instead, it mainly depended on party labels, which affected the mobilization structure, as we argue here.

The Democratic Party, contrary to most center-right parties in Eastern Europe, was already established as a party organization before the first parliamentary elections after regime change. Vachudova (2008) highlights three key factors that characterized the anti-regime opposition movement in 1989 or 1990, which bequeathed a specific legacy influencing the type

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of the center-right party that dominated after regime change. These factors include "the character, resources, and organizational capacities of the opposition before 1989" (2008, 395).

The opposition movement's character was diverse and pluralistic, including within almost any anti-communist opposition, liberals, social democrats, and conservatives. Henceforth, we argue that the character of the opposition movement is not a pre-condition for the type of center-right party that becomes dominant after the regime change and after the first parliamentary elections. More proximate causes, such as party strategy, mobilization power through the establishment of a predominant social base, and the behavior of the center-right party towards political institutions created after regime change, contribute to or enhance the durability of the center-right political party. However, the familiarity of the party label and its consistency over time remain crucial in predicting a party's long-term success.

As Enyedi (2005b) has argued, the political elites empower existing societal cleavages. This happened in most cases, like the Visegrád countries or some of the former Yugoslav republics like Slovenia or Croatia, where a culture of cultural and political dissidence existed even during communism, but not in Albania, which suffered from a totalitarian form of regime (Kalemaj 2020). In the Albanian case particularly, the anti-communist manifesto became the dominant speech through which different societal strata could articulate their various dissatisfactions with the country's political development, such that all other possible cleavages were subsumed to the communist versus anti-communist thesis, such as the case of DP (Kajsiu 2016a, 2016b).

Regarding elite resources, DP was established in favorable conditions because the traditional anti-communist diaspora was banned from contesting the first parliamentary elections and getting organized politically. On the other hand, the key representatives of the DP were part of the state socialist intelligentsia, which started to manifest some degree of autonomy from the state socialist regime in the late 1980s and did not seek to reform or merely liberalize the communist regime. Thus, one could argue that the opposition had sufficient resources to become appealing to the public. Meanwhile, it was also the first party of the opposition to be established, thus having an early advantage over the others. Furthermore, DP's leadership strategically chose to identify the party with anti-communist ideology and with the social group of the politically persecuted, who became the DP's social base's core unit. In this respect, the DP responded to later splinter parties such as DAP (Albanian: Aleanca Demokratike), which remained an elitist cadre party without a consistent social base and mass membership. The DP exercised a political agency to foster linkages with a specific social group and to alienate the social groups or communities whose identity was not anti-communist or established due to the dividing lines of the Second World War.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This study focuses on DP and HULCD while using the Most Different Case Design. The scope condition limits itself to spatial dimension by focusing on Eastern European political space and its programmatic nature by specifying the center-right parties. Temporally, we restrict ourselves to the post-1990s since this is the period when the opposition parties contested the

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former communist regimes. Therefore, we consider only newly created opposition parties that emerged as anti-communist fronts and occupied the center-right in the political spectrum.

For this study, we exclude other similar parties that did not necessarily emerge as anti-regime opposition fronts but had an ethnic or nationalist background.

The Most Different Case Design, where cases differ but have the same results (King et al. 1994), enables us to understand why, given the many differences between Albania and Lithuania, they still have the same outcome of resourcefulness and success of their center-right parties. Despite their distinct geographies, historical trajectories, political cultures, and institutional frameworks, the Democratic Party (DP) in Albania and the Homeland Union - Lithuanian Christian Democrats (HULCD) have both experienced similar successful trajectories in the post-communist period, emerging as and maintaining their positions as the dominant parties on the right side of the political spectrum. Furthermore, despite the ethnic homogeneity in the Albanian case and the multi-ethnicity with a solid ethnic Russian community in Lithuania, along with differing institutional foundations and electoral rules, both parties have demonstrated the same resilience in achieving success as center-right parties. Simultaneously, these cases stand out as the sole exceptions to the uninterrupted political success among other center-right parties that emerged after communism.

This study also sheds light upon most other unsuccessful trajectories of the center-right parties in Eastern Europe. In contrast, Albania and Lithuania proved more resilient despite the same threats and the presence of split parties and other domestic competition. To this day, they both remain the single largest parties on the right of the political spectrum and one of two dominant parties overall in their respective countries, which, according to our operationalization, is the primary indicator of political success.

The present study also proposes a framework for understanding the center-right parties in this part of Europe and analyses their post-communist trajectories. In line with that, our dependent variable is party success, while the independent variable is the consistency of the party label. We measure party success as achieved by the ability to remain one of the two major political parties in the entire post-communist period. In contrast, the consistency of the party label is indicated by retaining the party's original name as a key identification mark that connects with voters. Therefore, we argue that such parties' success is conditioned by their resilience, which is measured particularly by label durability. Our hypotheses, which we test through the selected cases, consider party durability as a critical determinant factor vis-à-vis party strategy, mobilization power, or preference by the international partners.

Meanwhile, our intervening variable is challengers within the same political camp and their relative success or failure to impose significant electoral damage on the main center-right parties. We rely on data collection from primary documents such as party statutes to secondary data analysis of the V-Party Dataset and the Political Parties, Presidents, Elections and Governments database (PPEG) to highlight features of party identity and ideological consistency as well as party vote share in parliamentary elections as a feature of party success. We also rely on an extensive review of literature in the field. We mainly focus on secondary analysis of "the use of existing research data to find the answer to a question that differed from the original work" (Szabo and Strang 1997).

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Eastern European Party Instability

The Eastern European political parties of the center-right emerged as the frontline resistance and contestation to the ailing communist regimes. That was true from Budapest to Tirana and from Vilnius to Sofia. Irrespective of the fact that some of these former communist regimes have been totalitarian like Soviet Union during Stalin's era or the example of Albania under Hoxha regime, post-totalitarian like the Visegrád countries, authoritarian like Poland (Stepan and Linz 1996), or *a sui generis* "market socialism" like Tito's Yugoslavia (Uvalić 2018), they all shared a post-communist transition that emerged either with a violent uprising like in the aftermath of Ceauşescu's Romania or the format of "velvet revolution" like in Prague. These social and political revolutions brought into power either successor parties, primarily composed of reinvented communist parties transformed into socialist or social-democratic parties, marked by changes in party labels. Alternatively, they ushered in newly created center-right parties that injected new political dynamism by introducing novel forms of resistance, narratives, and political activity. Some of these center-right parties were short-lived, such as the Union of Democratic Forces in Bulgaria, which were soon penalized in electoral terms because of market reforms they undertook and shrank to political insignificance after that, or they transformed themselves ideologically, although solidly remained one of the main actors in the political scene, like Fidesz in Hungary, which undertook a U-turn from political liberalism toward a conservative political party advocating illiberal democracy (Keneş 2020).

The two notable exceptions from the general rule are HULCD and DP. Both share the same traits of economic liberalism and liberal conservativism with the majority of the European People's Party Group (EPP), members of which they both are. Below is a table that constructs a typology of center-right parties' success depending on the consistency of party labels from the beginning of political pluralism in 1989 until now.

Table 1: Consistency of Party Label and Ideology: Varied Levels of Political Success (Source: Authors' depiction)

Consistency of party label	Party success (DV): High	Party success (DV): Low
High	DP **(AL)** HULCD (**LT**)	Christian Democratic Movement **(SK)** Civic Movement (**CZ**- now defunct) Fidesz **(HU)** Union of Democratic Forces **(BG)**
Low	National Liberal Party **(RO)** Partidul Democrat (RO)- later changed its label to PDL **(RO)**	Freedom Union (**PL**)

In line with our argument, the table above does not consider parties such as GERB/SDS in Bulgaria, which was founded in 2006, or other similar center-right parties that did not emerge in the late 1980s/early 1990s for the first time. We also exclude other parties that may fit ideologically and were created in this time frame but had an ethnic/nationalist background rather than an ideological, anti-regime one.

Democratic Party of Albania

In general, in cases like Albania, where the past still divides present politics, the competition has continuously revolved around the two major parties, even though such parties lack clear ideological profiles (Meka and Kalemaj 2018). However, both the Socialist Party and the Democratic Party represent not only the political spectrum at large but also a stark contrast to each other and clear alternatives to voters of the left and right. As such, they have dominated the Albanian political life and election cycles from 1991 until now. The resilience of the party labels for both has been an indicator of these parties' strength and continuity. While it is easier to understand the success of the Socialist Party as the successor party of the previous Labor Party based on the communist legacy and the impact of critics of democracy (Meka and Kalemaj 2020), it is more puzzling to explain the DP's success in longevity and electoral strength.

Not only is DP a rarity among the Eastern European center-rights parties to maintain its status as one of the country's two main parties, but it has also kept the same label uninterrupted and, even more importantly, the same ideological roots from its inception. This party was created as a sizeable anti-communist movement and served as a catch-all party for liberal democrats and social conservatives, for former politically persecuted and property owners, and has continuously done well among the country's youth. It is a member of EPP and shares the conventional thinking of center-right parties, mainly from Germany's CDU, Great Britain's Conservative Party, and the US Republican Party.

The Albanian Democratic Party started its life on 12 December 1990 and, after failing in the first general elections, triumphed in the parliamentary elections on 22 March 1992. Its electoral campaign promised and, in large part, realized daring reforms that signaled a break with the totalitarian regime, such as free-market reforms, the rule of law, and the protection of individual freedoms, including property rights. On the other hand, it also grew increasingly autocratic under the leadership of Sali Berisha, who became the Republic's President and kept tight control of the DP.

The Democratic Party of Albania and its allies secured 122 out of 140 seats in the parliament after the second round in 1996 (Nohlen and Stöver 2010, 133), enabling them to form a majority government (Albania, Parliamentary Chamber 1996), with Sali Berisha securing another term as President. The Socialist Party (SP) and the Albanian opposition vehemently contested these elections due to alleged irregularities. Following the breakdown of civil order in 1997 stemming from widespread Ponzi schemes, the Democratic Party lost the preliminary general elections of 1997 and entered opposition for two terms. It returned under the leadership of Sali Berisha, who was appointed prime minister in 2005. This comeback lasted for two full terms in coalition with partner parties until the party lost the general elections of 2013.

Currently, the Democratic Party (DP) faces its most significant existential threat, which originates from within its ranks. Sali Berisha, the party's former leader and founder, spearheads a challenge against its current chairman, Lulzim Basha, despite having supported him for eight years and through three consecutive re-elections within the party. This rift emerged after the US Department of State publicly designated Sali Berisha due to his involvement in significant corruption (Blinken 2021), leading Lulzim Basha to expel him from the DP parliamentary group. This situation represents the party's most formidable test to date. The risk of the party splitting into two factions looms large, as both sides have submitted independent statutes to the court and have conducted their national conventions, each claiming rightful authority over the party. However, the only factor preventing an official split is the DP label and seal, which hold significant sway and command numerous votes due to their legacy and enduring resilience. Consequently, both factions vie for legitimacy as the rightful owners of the party label, symbols, and most of its members.

What makes it particularly compelling for this paper is Berisha's declaration stating that "in former communist countries, center-right political parties that emerged as anti-communist forces are now archived. But we survived" (Berisha 2021). This statement makes a dual assertion: firstly, that the credit for the party's persistence should be attributed to him as the one currently rescuing the party, and secondly, that it should not be assumed that the party will continue to exist indefinitely.

However, during the last three decades, DP has shown such party label durability and overall resilience based on its loyal positioning toward state institutions and its mobilization power, mainly through broad-based societal coalitions such as those formerly persecuted by the Communist regime and former property owners, as well as being recognized as the official partner by EPP, IDU and other international networks of center-right parties. The DP's party statutes indicate the consistency of party ideology. According to the DP's 2018 party statute, the DP stands for: "freedom, democracy, belief in God, traditional family, and sanctity of private property. Freedom, human dignity, fair competition, and meritocracy stand at the core of its philosophy" (DP Party Statute 2018). DP maintained these values and ideology from 12 December 1990, when it was first created as the main opposition party. The same ideological principles are reiterated lately in Article 3 of the latest DP statute (DP Party Statute 2023). Thus, the DP reflects the same values and norms of the liberal-conservative EPP political group, to which it belongs as a center-right party. According to the V-Party dataset on the ideological stances of the Albanian political parties along the economic left-right scale, evidenced by Figure 1 below, the DP has shown a clear ideological consistency of a mainstream center-right party from the early 90s until 2016.

Specifically regarding the party's label durability as the primary indicator of success, until recently, it is notable that all splinter parties that emerged from the Democratic Party (DP), such as the Democratic Alliance (established in 1992 and still active), the New Democratic Party (active from 1999 to 2009), or the New Democratic Breathing (Albanian: FRD, active from 2012 to present), failed to achieve any significant political success. Instead, they either became defunct or remained fringe parties. The existing political feud within the DP further supports our hypothesis, as both factions, led by Berisha and Basha, struggle to retain control over the party

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label, stamp, building, and symbols. This contention underscores the belief of both sides that the party label, in particular, holds significant value in representing the party's history and tradition.

The Democratic Party (DP), as indicated by the data in Table 2, depicting weighted vote share, has maintained stable popular support in nearly all parliamentary elections from 1991 to 2021, solidifying its position as the dominant center-right party in post-communist Albania.

These findings underscore the enduring success of the DP as a political entity.

Table 2: Weighted Vote Share of the Democratic Party in Parliamentary Elections (Source: PPEG 2022)

1991	1992	1996	1997	2001	2005	2009	2013	2017	2021
38.7 %	62.2 %	55.5 %	25.7 %	36.8 %	7.67 %	40 %	30.6 %	28.8 %	39.4 %

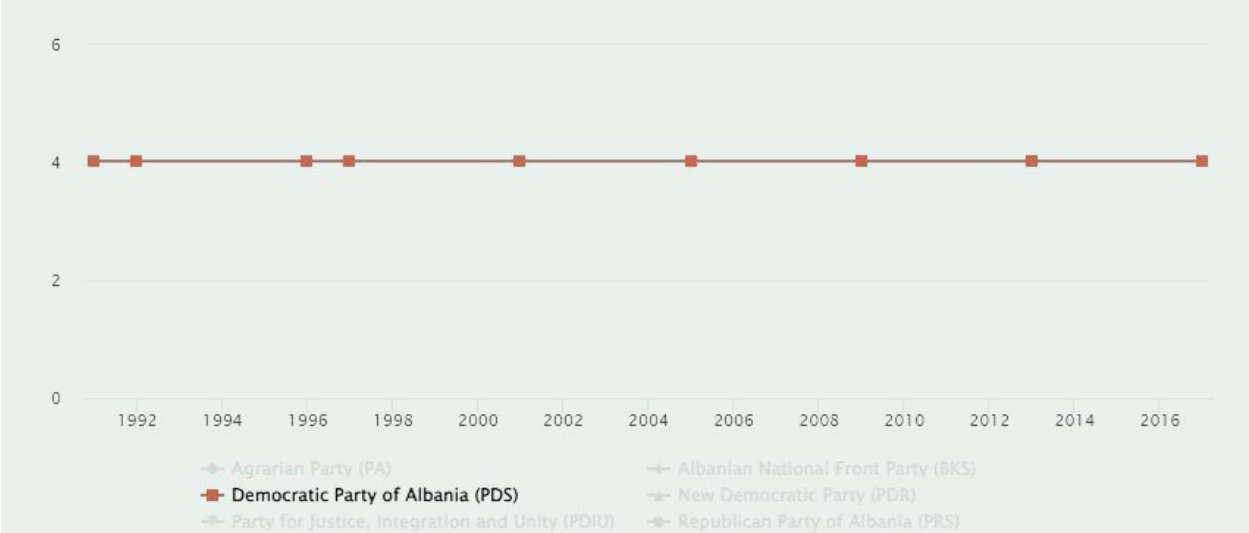


Figure 1: DP Economic Left-Right Scale (Source: V-Party Dataset 2022)
0: Far-left; 1: Left; 2: Center-left; 3: Center; 4: Center-right; 5: Right; 6: Far-right

Homeland Union - Lithuanian Christian Democrats of Lithuania

The background case of HULCD reinforces our main tenets and compares favorably to DP as one of the resilient center-right parties in the CEE until now. This party is a conservative center-right party in Lithuania (Smith 2019; Ramonaitė 2020). It has had a solid membership since its foundation (Novagrockienė 2001), and last year, the party performed well again, receiving 50 of the 141 seats in the Lithuanian Parliament (Lithuania: Parliamentary Elections 2020). Following that election, it formed a ruling coalition comprising Lithuania's present government, in partnership with the Liberal Movement and the Freedom Party, which won 13 and 11 seats, bringing the coalition's majority to 74 of 141 seats (Lithuania: Parliamentary Elections 2020).

Scholars of the Lithuanian party system consider the establishment of the Sąjūdis movement (Reform Movement of Lithuania) in 1988 as the origin of a heterogeneous political

organization (Novagrockienė 2001, 142; Krupavičius 1998, 469) of Lithuanian opposition against the Soviet rule and the Lithuanian Communist Party. "Following the first competitive elections, the communists were exchanged for broad coalitions of opposition reformers ranging from radical nationalists to westernized liberals" (Krupavičius 1998, 470-71). The initial ideological heterogeneity of the Sąjūdis movement led to the formation of various political factions within the Lithuanian parliament and extra-parliamentary parties. The Homeland Union, which constituted the right-wing faction of the Reform Movement of Lithuania, founded in 1993, became the ideological, organizational, and rank-and-file heir of the Sąjūdis movement. As in most post-communist countries, including the case study of Albania, the early 1990s witnessed the re-emergence of inter-war historical parties in Lithuania (Krupavičius 1998, 468). The Lithuanian Christian Democratic Party (LCDP) is one of those historic parties that was re-established "based on a reconstruction of historical political traditions" (Krupavičius 1998, 482). In 2008, the LCDP merged with the Homeland Union, creating the HULCD.

The dominant political parties in post-communist Lithuania, the HUCLD and the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party (LSDP), ex-communists, "inherited part of their membership base from the pre-transition period" (Smith 2019, 52). More specifically, the HULCD "inherited members from the anti-communist Sąjūdis organization" (Smith 2019, 65). Members of the HULCD developed through time, because of party cues and ideological consistency, "a normative attachment to the idea of traditional, programmatic membership parties" (Smith 2019, 52).

As heir to the Sąjūdis movement, the HUCLD was challenged, on the one hand, by centrist liberal parties and, on the other hand, by right-wing anti-establishment parties. Factions within the Sąjūdis movement's parliamentary representation created the Liberal faction in 1990 (Novagrockienė 2001, 145). The centrists were grouped later in the Lithuanian Liberal Union (LLU) (Novagrockienė 2001, 145). In the 1996 parliamentary elections, the Centrist Union constituted the party of the centrist liberals and moderates (Novagrockienė 2001, 150). The "Young Lithuania" party represented a political party to the right of the HUCLD. Anti-establishment and populist parties emerged in Lithuania during the second decade after the regime transition. Since 2004, "the Lithuanian party system witnessed a rise of new parties, such as the Labor Party or the Party of National Resurrection, without any clear ideological stance" (Ramonaitė 2020, 479). Yet, these two parties were not very successful. A far more challenging contender was the Union of Farmers and Greens (LVŽS), a populist, anti-establishment party competing on an anti-corruption ticket and contradictory ideological stances, which won the 2016 parliamentary elections (Ramonaitė 2020). The Union of Farmers and Greens has been regarded as "a Lithuanian counterpart of the Polish 'Law and Justice' Party" (Ramonaitė 2020, 479). As Khoma and Kokoriev (2021) argue, "populist and radical organizations have not received significant levers of impact in Lithuania" (p. 51). Thus, the HUCLD party represents a mainstream and dominant center-right party in Lithuania with consistent party success, without endorsing either the mainstreaming of the radical right or transforming the political tradition of the HUCLD into a centrist party.

The Sąjūdis movement, from which the HULCD originated, was transformed from a loose movement representing various political factions and diverse ideologies into a predominantly center-right ideological formation, getting rid of its anti-communist left-wing, and centrist

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factions (Novagrockienė 2001, 145). The remaining ideological formation of the Sąjūdis movement became the basis of the HULCD. Thus, most Lithuanian party system scholars agree that the HULCD has shown stable ideological consistency since its establishment. As Smith (2019) argues, the HUCLD endorsed a "full range of policies grounded in a consistent ideology" (p. 9), distinguishing itself from the populist right parties. According to the V-Party dataset on the ideological stances of the Lithuanian political parties along the economic left-right scale, as evidenced in Figure 2 below, the HULCD has manifested a consistent center-right ideological outlook.

This party, which was founded in 1993, continues to the present day with the same label and same ideological roots, which are a mixture of Christian democracy and a "classic liberal-conservative" party (Bugajski 2002, 141), as the other sister parties of EPP as well as International Democracy Union, part of which has been from the start. In addition to these traits, the HUCLD party has also maintained an uninterrupted streak of nationalism (Clark 2006). Given the ethnic makeup of Lithuania, where around 16 percent are ethnic minorities, particularly Poles and Russians, but as many as 154 nationalities (Lithuania 2021), according to the last census, it is somewhat self-explanatory. However, this demonstrates its unique ability to mobilize power within the main Lithuanian political parties.

The HULCD's party statute of 2018 stipulates the political principles and goals this center-right political party stands for. The objective of "the HULCD is to continue mobilizing the nation and strengthen democracy based on Christian democratic values in Lithuania, Lithuanian statehood consolidation and economic reforms (…) an economy based on free initiative and general welfare developmental" (TS-LKD 2018). As the data in Table 3 below indicate, the HULCD has maintained a solid and consistent vote share in almost all consecutive parliamentary elections, except for the year 2000 weighted vote share of 7.8 percent. This serves as an empirical manifestation of party success.

In summary, Lithuania and Albania exhibit distinct political cultures, histories, and trajectories regarding institution formation and perceptions of foreign threats. Consequently, center-right parties in these countries may not necessarily espouse identical political agendas. However, despite these differences, both cases demonstrate similar party stability, which serves as our dependent variable, along with the durability of party labels. Additionally, both parties are affiliated with similar international unions, possess broad societal legitimacy, and wield significant mobilization powers while maintaining uninterrupted success over three decades.

Table 3: HULCD Weighted Vote Share in Parliamentary Elections (Source: PPEG 2022)

1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020
30 %	7.8 %	15 %	19.6 %	16.2 %	22 %	24.9 %

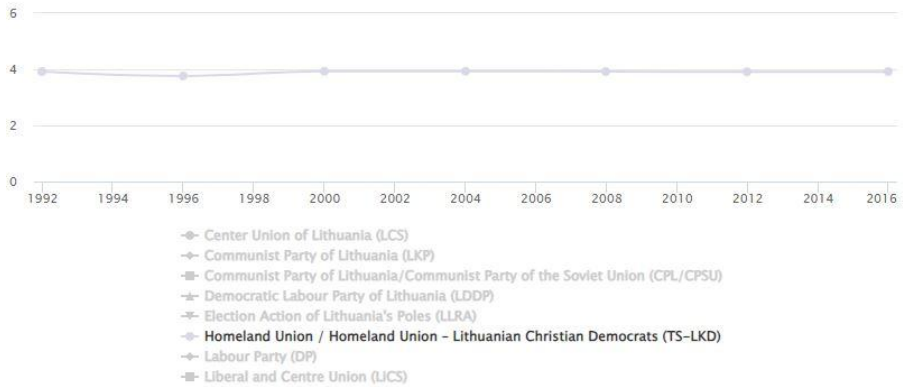


Figure 2: HULCD Economic Left-Right Scale (Source: V-Party Dataset 2022)
0: Far-left; 1: Left; 2: Center-left; 3: Center; 4: Center-right; 5: Right; 6: Far-right

CONCLUSION

This article focuses on a particular angle around center-right political parties that emerged as broad citizen coalitions in Eastern Europe after communism. It specifically examines the eventual lack of success experienced by these early center-right parties, which either became marginalized, altered their ideologies, or ceased to exist altogether. Exceptions identified after extensive literature review are the Democratic Party of Albania and the Homeland Union-Lithuanian Christian Democrats of Lithuania. While the Lithuanian Party enjoys stability, its Albanian counterpart is undergoing the most significant existential crisis in its three decades due to internal divisions. Nevertheless, both parties remain the single largest parties on the right of the political spectrum and one of the two dominant parties in their respective countries, which attests to their political success.

This study is not only intriguing due to its empirical puzzle but also because it contributes to theory building and advances a framework for understanding such parties in former Eastern Europe. Furthermore, it seeks to comprehend the explanatory factors contributing to party durability and ideological resilience over time, particularly considering their electoral success. While many of these parties disappeared due to an inability to withstand new competition or internal divisions or became marginalized, some underwent complete ideological shifts (from liberal to conservative) to sustain their electoral success. Such parties rarely maintained their original names, labels, ideological frameworks, and basic programs while succeeding electorally. By examining the cases of DP and HULCD as outliers among the center-right parties that emerged in the aftermath of communism in Eastern Europe, this article sheds light on the durability of party labels as a critical determinant of party success in the long run.

Hopefully, this study will stimulate new debates in the field by expanding existing scholarship and opening up new avenues of research that focus on this dimension. We anticipate that similar studies will emerge regarding left-wing and center-left parties in the same region or comparable studies examining both right and left parties in Western Europe and other regions. Large-N studies and similar comparative studies could benefit from this expanding scholarship by exploring electorate volatility, label durability, and parties' resilience in the long run, thereby enriching our understanding of these phenomena.

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CRediT AUTHOR STATEMENT

Ilir Kalemaj: conceptualization, methodology, literature review, original draft preparation, writing and supervision. **Sokol Lleshi:** conceptualization, literature review, data curation, writing, reviewing, and editing.

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